

THE NATIONAL IRRIGATION IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE

by Terry P. Lynott

Over the last several years, private and public sector interests have been pursuing a more focused approach to define and address the need for better water and land management in irrigated agriculture and irrigated non-agricultural applications. Out of these efforts has sprung the National Irrigation Water and Land Improvement Initiative (Initiative). It is a public-private partnership effort directed towards recognizing certain problems and opportunities in irrigation practices across the nation.

The vision for the Initiative is to create a setting for the use of water and land for irrigation, in harmony with other demands for these resources, in the most efficient and environmentally acceptable manner possible. It is recognized that some irrigated areas have developed water quality and other environmental problems largely through practices which have caused irrigation induced erosion and other related problems. Consequently, a priority is to resolve these problems. Pressure to minimize water usage, and negate resulting environmental and economic impacts is intensifying for many agricultural and non-agricultural irrigators.

A primary objectives of the initiative is to provide recognition of the many successful irrigation related activities and programs occurring throughout the nation. To accomplish this, a "framework" of descriptive materials based largely upon input from the practioners in irrigation water and land applications is being developed. Other principal objectives include disseminating information about proven technologies, programs and practices to:

- conserve water and topsoil;
- improve and protect water quality;
- improve and maintain habitat for fish and wildlife; and
- reduce irrigation-induced erosion.

To pursue this vision and address these objectives, four goal statements have been developed:

1) Encourage and assist with establishing local and state alliances to identify problems and opportunities,

to formulate and implement solutions, and to monitor and report results about irrigation water and land practices.

2) Establish and publicize an integrated educational, technical assistance and research program to transfer and provide current technology to customers and other stakeholders.

3) Identify and showcase integrated framework processes to serve as models for local and state entities in establishing successful watershed improvement programs and assist in identifying potential funding sources for implementation.

4) Serve as a catalyst in providing "public forums" to address problems and seek solutions to significant issues relating to irrigation and the environment. Attention will be given to developing recommendations for legislative needs, research requirements, and appropriate policy and guidance needs primarily from local and state-level sources.

More than 30 specific supporting activities have been developed to bring still more focus to a "framework" of possibilities for examination, adaptation and implementation by local organizations and entities. Both near-term and longer-term results are anticipated; thus, it is expected that this framework of irrigation water and land information will be constantly changing and improving. A significant amount of promising results from a technical, financial, research and educational perspective have been accomplished — primarily at the local level. These results and other germane information are being summarized to provide readily usable material about water and land improvement practices focused on environmental protection, ecosystem health, and sustainable agricultural production.

An overriding theme of this Initiative is not to "reinvent the wheel." Rather, learning about and conveying information on success stories is the central theme. Emphasis is given to the use of private-public partnerships formed at the local level. Developing means to reinforce ongoing activities, providing incentives to get

other efforts initiated, and broadening the knowledge about and dissemination of existing data and information from the bast storehouses of government agencies, associations and the private corporate sector are major efforts to be completed. Other forms of assistance — including technical expertise and guidance — and attaining public and private funding for pilot demonstration projects of irrigation water and land improvements are major anticipated Initiative activities.

The Initiative is directed by a group of representatives from private enterprise and the public sector. Overall coordination is provided by a staff representative from the National Association of Conservation Districts. It is hoped that the cooperative spirit encompassed by this process can serve as a guide for other partnerships generated by efforts emanating from this Initiative.

The first major effort, after completing the "plan of action for the general conduct of the Initiative, has been to develop and transmit an introductory package and a brief survey to solicit information about various activities underway in irrigation water and land practices. The survey portion of this effort was carried out during the summer and early fall of 1995 and compilation and analysis of the data and information received is underway. The introductory package contained a transmittal letter, a statement introducing the Initiative, a section introducing and describing the "framework" with examples of information gained to that point in time, and a short survey of the reader to complete and return.

As noted earlier, many promising efforts have already been initiated to address problems and opportunities, primarily at the local level. During the course of the survey, several of these efforts were briefly described in a "framework" setting to provide some guidance and stimulate thinking about those which might have potential for recipients of the introductory and survey package in their dealings with matters of a similar nature.

The "framework" contains information about irrigation water and land practices gained from practitioners across the nation. This information is presented in a series of categories. The categories (or subjects) and a brief description follow:

- **Partnership Processes** — the means of bringing together separate organizations and interests in an alliance to address water and land conservation issues.

- **Communication Practices** — processes used to disseminate and exchange information and provide educational experiences regarding water and land conservation practices.

- **Creative Financing** — the means to attract and obtain funding through grants, cost sharing, loans and other arrangements for examining and implementing water and land conservation practices.

- **Program Descriptions** — brief, yet concise definitions of the myriad of water and land conservation programs and activities emanating from the public and private sector.

- **Technical Assistance** — providing hands-on advice and assistance relating to water and land conservation practices.

- **Data Bases** — a brief description of the multitude of water and land conservation data bases in existence including how to access them.

- **Proposal Development** — advice on how to formulate and present a water and land conservation proposal to gain assistance, data or other information and support.

- **Technology Transfer** — a description of types of technical information available regarding water and land conservation matters, and an indication of how to obtain it.

- **Research Needs** — a means to identify and recommend a need for further efforts by the public and/or private sector in water and land conservation research matters.

- **Interacting with Government** — a description of means and processes to interact effectively with all levels of government regarding water and land conservation matters.

- **Interacting with the Private Sector** — a description of means and processes to interact effectively with the key associations, organizations, interest groups and corporations involved in water and land conservation activities.

- **Marketing Processes** — the ability to package and present usable water and land conservation information and to obtain a return as a result of these efforts.

- **Rules and Regulations** — guidance and information for dealing with rules, regulations and procedures relating to water and land conservation practices.

Several innovative activities and efforts are presently underway. Many of them bridge across more than one of the categories in the "framework;" but for purposes of this effort they are placed in one and cross-referenced with others. As each of these categories in the "framework" becomes fleshed out with examples, the objectives of having a multitude of data and information, and a listing of key contacts will have been met. The end result will be a "shopping list" of descriptive materials for the information and use of the customer and stakeholders. Exploration continues on various means to make this information readily available in the most user friendly manner possible.

Another important aspect of the Initiative is the pilot or demonstration projects phase. This effort includes the formulation of proposals, evaluation of same, selection of projects for implementation, and the conduct of them. Several key steps are completed, underway or scheduled for the near future, including:

- 1) developing specific steps and a schedule for the pilot/demonstration phase;

- 2) exploring means for providing funding for this phase through grants, cost-sharing, loans, etc.;

- 3) developing a call for proposals including criteria and requirements expected from applicants and the Initiative;

- 4) developing a process and procedures for evaluating proposals;

- 5) developing recommendations for proposal implementation and presentation to the Initiative's Management Team;

- 6) final selection of successful proposals and notification to all applications;

- 7) initiating implementation of pilot/demonstration projects;

- 8) developing process for monitoring and reporting on project progress; and

- 9) preparing a "final" report on the overall Initiative activities.

The "framework" will be continually expanded throughout the implementation phase of the Initiative to account for all information gained as a result of the survey phase, the initiation of workshops and conferences, and the results of the pilot/demonstration phase. Recommendations can then be formulated for a variety of activities including possible support for additional "pilot projects" using a watershed-based approach; for the development and execution of additional conferences and workshops; and for the implementation of other means of data and information exchange.

Exchanging cogent information about effective irrigation water and land practices will be realized if this Initiative attains its goals and objectives. Partnerships among the public and private sectors are critical to the level of success to be attained. Also of critical importance is the commitment of additional funding for much of the pilot demonstration phase. The National Association of Conservation Districts is continuing to strongly support the Initiative. With continued interest from the other key organizations and entities in both the public and private sector, and the generation of interest of others involved in irrigation water and land practices the overall vision outlined at the beginning of this paper will be realized.

About the author

Lynott is the Irrigated Agriculture Initiative coordinator of the National Association of Conservation Districts in Lakeland, Colo.